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August 25, 1995

Plan for fall writing:

Nearly everything written about the role of nuclear weapons, deterrence, plans, etc. has been nonsense, and largely irrelevant: as badly misdirected as most accounts of the Hiroshima "decision."

That's because, in part, none of these writers have had the particular experience and information that I had: precisely at a time when the US had a near-monopoly of strategic force. And my experience spanned the period when the US did not know--or pretended not to know--that it had such a monopoly, and the succeeding period when the President knew this very well, but in no appropriate way acted on this information. (Nor did anyone else, including me).

I was just saying to Patricia: even now, no one writing about these subjects would share my perspective...except for those actually working on war plans and operations. "And people who get access to these plans don't see anything wrong with them...don't see how crazy they are."

Having said that, the question occurred to me: Why is this? After all, some of these people--Walt Slocum, others--are very intelligent? Why can't they see that strategies that seemed appropriate to me in a very different period and context became obviously insane in the world as it evolved just a few years later?

An answer occurred to me, for the first time: all those people were introduced to the plans in a period when the Soviets, imitating us after 1964, had built up their force to the same crazy levels as ours, and were imitating our counterforce capabilities. Nor were they tempted to believe that the Brezhnev buildup and posture could be easily stopped or reversed. So they were looking at a force that seemed to rationalise our own and our plans, despite the joint craziness of the programs (as in Prisoner's Dilemma?).

I, on the other hand, began by seeing the "balance" as it actually later became, i.e., as if the world Slocum et al confronted had already existed in 1958-61. That is why these strategies seemed relevant, though desperate and obviously dangerous, to me at the time, and to all my colleagues. (The meaning of these strategies was different to Air Force officers who had a better knowledge of Soviet weakness and vulnerability; they understood that these plans were oriented to first-strike, not to deterrence of nuclear attack).

But in September 1961 I became aware--long before any of my RAND colleagues--that the real world was entirely different from what we had been told and believed. The difference was as great as the world of Europe and the Warsaw Pact before 1989-91 and after. It was like two different planets.

And did I suggest then that we should reexamine all our assumptions, concepts, plans, in light of this new world? The possibilities for a test ban, for radical arms control? No, I did not; nor did any other official or consultant.

My own first reaction was: How does this bear on our immediate crisis, the Berlin Crisis? Khrushchev was threatening to turn over access to Berlin to East Germany in December, just two months away. He had no missiles at all! (to be precise, four). He couldn't possibly face down the US; he was bluffing! (He had clearly been lying to us and the world about his ICBM production). So I embarked on a campaign to call his bluff. And I eventually succeeded in doing so; and two days after Gilpatric delivered my speech exposing the true missile gap in our favor, Khrushchev dropped his commitment to signing a peace treaty with East Germany that year. The Berlin Crisis was over. My speech had ended it.

As I told Patricia: I felt pretty good about that. Unfortunately--I didn't know it till years later--my speech, exposing his bluff and humiliating him, as well as revealing the strategic consequences of the missile imbalance, impelled Khrushchev to try to even the playing field as fast as he could. The only way he could do that quickly was by secretly transporting some intermediate and medium range missiles to within range of the US: in Cuba.

[Burlesque routine: "That's bad."

"No, that was good; we won a great victory in the Cuban Crisis."

"That's good."

"No, that was bad. Partly as a result of this humiliation, Khrushchev was replaced by Brezhnev, who promised the military, for their support, that they would never be in that position again; that led to a twenty five year nuclear buildup in the SU, and thus on both sides."

"That's bad."

"No, that was good [according to Reagan]. It bankrupted the Soviet Union and led to the ending to the ending of the Cold War, the breakup of the Soviet Empire and the downfall of Communism."

"That's good."

"No, that was bad. Now we have war in former Yugoslavia, we may have civil war in Russia, and the Mafia running Russia may allow nuclear weapons to leak out to all sides. And a fascist government in Russia will continue to have enough nuclear weapons to destroy life on earth, as will we."

"That's bad."

"Yes, that's bad."]

But by late October, the Berlin Crisis appeared to be over. Why didn't we--why didn't I, why didn't anyone--say then: OK, now let's look at everything anew, from the bottom? (A "Bottom Up Review"). Maybe we have totally underrated the possibilities of far-reaching arms control, nuclear disarmament! Is there some way we could keep the Soviets down to four ICBMs, or even get those dismantled? After all, Khrushchev has only built four, after all, without any agreement limiting ours. Isn't it possible that an agreement limiting ours as well could keep a lid on his, or even eliminate them?

Why isn't a test ban feasible? And a test ban on missile tests!

Yet as Ray Garthoff has reported--about a group, for which he was the rapporteur, assigned to assess the significance of the new intelligence for our strategic programs--the only question they looked at was: In the light of these new findings, are our programs adequate?

Needless to say, our programs projecting a minimum of 1000 Minutemen looked "adequate." How could they have looked otherwise? Why did this question need to be addressed at all?!

Yet that was really the only question they looked at. Not: might our programs be a little excessive? They have four, we need 1000? How could that have made sense to anyone?

Pat: Well, that's the US reaction to the new situation, now. Sure: and for basically the same reasons: we don't want to give up the "superiority" (in this case, to the rest of the world), or the force structure, or the jobs, production, profits. JFK wanted to build 1000 missiles starting in the fall of 1961, for domestic economic reasons.

"He wouldn't give it up for the world." (As Mort Sahl quoted Ike as saying about letting John Foster Dulles go. Sahl's comment: "At least he knows what the stakes are.")

But then I thought of another new question, and a new answer. How could Tom Schelling and Mort Halperin, who were just initiating the analytical field of arms control, have failed to see these possibilities? Answer: They didn't know, in vivid, precise, concrete terms, the extent of the shift in "reality." They didn't know the new estimates, or how reliably they were based. Like my listeners at my RAND briefing, even if they had been told the new estimate they probably wouldn't have believed it, or at least, really absorbed it. Like RAND, they went on living in the old world for several years--till it had changed decisively, to become more like the former, illusory perception.

(Recall that RAND thinking, in particular, had become frozen, as in amber, at the 1958 estimate of the missile gap, the last one they saw. In 1959 and 1960 and 1961, as the estimates began presenting dissenting footnotes, RAND perceptions still reflected the 1958 estimates of the impending gap, the largest gaps of all.)

[Note that people at different clearance levels live in different realities, different worlds of information. Thus, histories of the Cuban Missile Crisis, or the arms race [me versus nearly everyone else]; even JFK's outdated perceptions just before the Cuban Missile Crisis.]

Even people who learned, at one point or another, that there was no missile gap favoring the Soviets, but were led to believe--as was generally true for 10-20 years (and Rhodes said it again this year)--that the Soviets had "only 50" ICBMs in 1961, did not at all grasp the nature of the changed perception of reality.

A belief that the Russians had 50 missiles would not have raised any questions about the premises of our worldview or about the nature of Soviet aims and the possibilities of negotiation. That would have suggested that no fundamental changes were called for in our conceptual framework. The Soviets had simply been less successful in pursuing their goals than our worst-case conjectures had projected. So Halperin and Schelling (check this with them) would not have been led to imagine wholly different possibilities for concerting US-SU programs that were conceivable in 1959.

As for what I could have done: in reflecting on what McNamara should have done when he realized, no later than 1965 or 66, that his earlier hopes were unfounded, I realized this summer: I could have put out the war plans.

To be sure, that never occurred to me. I did imagine informing Congress, but since it was in the grip of Richard Russell, Strom Thurmond and such types, there didn't seem any promise in that. And the New York Times would not have been quick to print such things in 1961; in fact, they almost surely would not have done so.

And--Pat points out--I would certainly have gone to prison. She says: "You probably would have been executed." No: I could probably have done it in a way that would have avoided a conviction for treason (?). Anyway, we weren't at war. But prison, yes. The stakes looked as high to me, even then, as in Vietnam; in fact, obviously higher. I could have done it, if I had thought of it and if I could have found a way to get them out effectively. I think they would have made a major difference.

Pat: that's a heavy load to bear. Yes: but the same as with Vietnam, what I could have done in 1964-65. I just didn't think of it (unlike Rabinowitch, in 1945; and he had little reason to imagine that he would have made a difference, though in fact he might have--via the Japanese,

who were more ready to sue for peace than he knew)